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## Habitat management for

# Turkeys



### In Kansas

Two subspecies of turkey occur in the state. The eastern turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) occurs mainly in the eastern one-third of the state (fig. 1). The Rio Grande turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo intermedia*) occurs in the southern one-third of the state. Historically, both of these subspecies were residents of Kansas with the eastern turkey more common.

The Rio Grande turkey was reintroduced into Kansas in 1964 and 1966 with plantings from Texas. These birds are well adapted to openland/scattered riparian habitat and have thrived in southwest Kansas along the major streams and rivers. Starting in the 1970's, eastern turkey from Missouri were stocked in Kansas in Linn and Elk Counties. From 1980 through 1982, Missouri eastern turkeys were released in 20 Kansas counties. Turkeys also crossed the Missouri River in northeast Kansas and became established.

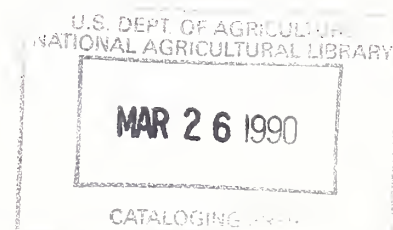
In addition to the Rio Grande and eastern turkey program, Kansas has also established crosses of the two subspecies. These two turkey subspecies crossed historically and a large portion of Kansas probably supported an intergradation of these birds.

Both subspecies are velvety black in color with bronze iridescence. The plumage of the Rio Grande is more greenish gold or coppery in color, and the tips of the tail feathers and lower back are much lighter in color than the eastern subspecies. Crosses of the subspecies take on characteristics of both. The major difference between the two subspecies is the habitat which they occupy. Easterns prefer woodland areas while Rio Grandes are at home in intermixed scattered trees and openings.

The turkey is our largest game bird with hens weighing 8 to 12 pounds and gobblers weighing 12 to 20 pounds. All males and a few females have beards. The most reliable way to identify the sex of a wild turkey is by the breast feathers which are squared and tipped in glossy black in males and roundish and buff tipped in females. In addition, males have spurs while females do not.

USDA-Soil Conservation Service, Salina, Kansas

May 1981



### LIFE HISTORY

In early spring, the flocks of adults break up and the mature males establish breeding or display areas. Each mature tom normally mates with a number of hens.

After mating, hens form a nest and begin laying. Hens usually select nesting sites that are located in semi-open grassland areas with sufficient low growing vegetation for concealment. A clutch of from 10 to 13 eggs is laid and incubated for approximately 28 days. Turkeys are poor renesters and once the eggs are hatched, the hen will not attempt to nest again that year.

After hatching, the chicks leave the nest and forage with the hen. The chicks sleep under the hen's wings on the ground for the first two weeks. During the third week they begin to roost on lower tree branches and are soon able to move to higher branches where the adults roost. Hens with broods usually will join into family groups which remain intact until the next breeding season.

Established turkey populations usually undergo a rapid turnover of individuals. Normal annual mortality may approach 50 percent of the flock. Turkeys younger than three years make up the majority of the population.

### HABITAT NEEDS

Food--Turkeys eat a wide variety of food including fruits, mast (nuts and seeds of trees), green leaves, seeds, and insects. Selection of these foods varies with the season and availability. Acorns and crops such as sorghum, corn, and soybeans, are the preferred foods during late fall, winter, and early spring periods. During late spring and summer choice foods include foliage of green plants, seeds, and available insects. Young turkeys depend heavily upon insects for food during their early development, but switch to seeds as crops and weeds mature. Fruits and berries such as wild grapes, choke cherries, and wild plums along with maturing crops, grasses, and clover, are taken during late summer and fall.

Water--Turkeys require drinking water every day. Since turkeys travel a mile or more during their normal daily feeding, water is available most of the time. Hens will usually nest near a permanent water supply.

Nesting Cover--Semi-open grassland areas with a good stand of vegetation for concealment are required for nesting. During nesting, the hen is very sensitive to disturbance and will sometimes abandon her nest if flushed during the 3-week egg-laying period and later during incubation. Alfalfa fields are attractive to hens for nesting.

Roosting Cover--Turkeys roost in trees along streams and at the edge of dense woodland. Roost trees usually are the largest trees available with horizontal branches. Turkeys fly from the tree at daylight to an open area to begin feeding.



### HABITAT MANAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS

The most practical means for meeting turkey habitat needs are through the maintenance and improvement of existing habitat.

1. Disturbance--Reduce disturbances of nesting areas during April, May, and June by excluding livestock and dogs and preventing fires. Reduce disturbances at roost sites to prevent flushing the turkey.
2. Roosting Cover--Maintain existing roost trees and plant mast producing trees along streamsides.
3. Nesting Cover--Develop a rangeland grazing system which allows a part of the rangeland alongside woody cover to remain ungrazed during the nesting season. Delay mowing of alfalfa nesting areas until July 1.
4. Food--Plant small food plots of clover, alfalfa, grain or forage sorghum, and corn along woodland corridors.
5. Water--Provide watering places where permanent water is not available within the turkeys' daily and potential range.
6. Disease--Avoid domestic poultry-wild turkey contacts. Wild turkey are very susceptible to domestic diseases.

### AREAS SUITABLE FOR HABITAT DEVELOPMENT

The daily range of turkeys is usually quite large and must include all habitat needs before a good turkey population can be maintained.

A balanced habitat will usually consist of a long section of riparian woodland containing some large trees along a perennial or intermittent stream. Land adjacent to the woodland strip should be alternate cropland and grassland areas. In the cropland sections, a narrow grass strip should be maintained adjacent to the woodland and a few rows of unharvested grain left standing. In the grassland sections, alternate areas should be left ungrazed on a rotation basis for use as nesting areas. Grassy openings should be provided in areas predominantly woodland. Range and pasture management in conjunction with proper woodland management will generally provide good turkey habitat.

The Soil Conservation Service, local conservation districts, the Kansas Fish and Game Commission, and the Kansas Cooperative Extension Service offer guidance on soil, water, plant, and wildlife habitat management.

KANSAS

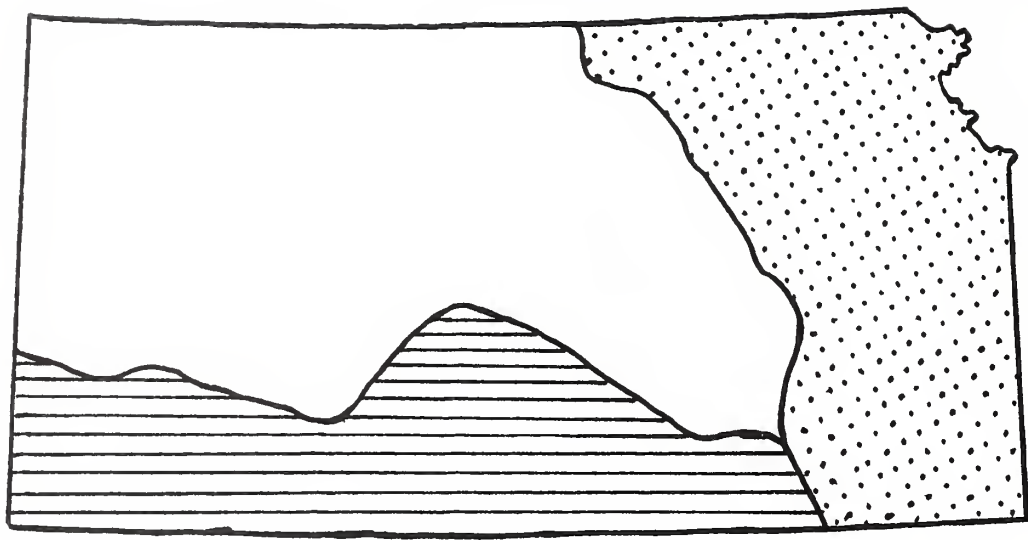
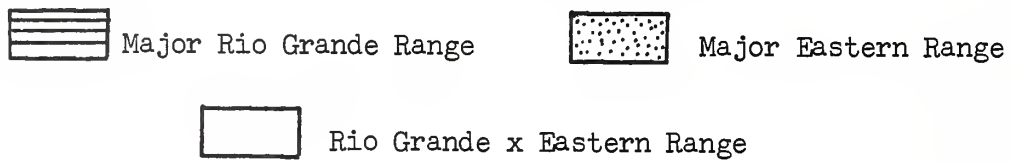


Figure 1  
GENERAL DISTRIBUTION OF TURKEYS

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